

[By Howard Weiss-Tisman](#)

While the drought in the Midwest has received most of the national attention concerning the stalled Farm Bill in Congress, farming and hunger advocates in Vermont say there will be plenty of consequences if legislators fail to move the bill forward when they return to Washington later this month.

And while there is a very small window of time to tackle the bill, lawmakers and advocates are trying to make a final push to pass the bill and protect many of the provisions that are set to expire, or change, at the end of this month.

Lawmakers will be returning to Washington Sept. 10, but Congress is only expected to be in session for eight days.

The current Farm Bill is set to expire on Sept. 30, and with a presidential election approaching fast, and key Senate and House races looming, House leaders have been unwilling to bring the controversial Farm Bill to the floor.

The Senate has already passed its version of the five-year bill.

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., and a member of the House Agriculture Committee, says while there are big differences between the Senate and House version of the bill, farmers across the nation deserve to at least have the bill debated.

"It's our job to act, and right now we are not doing our job," Welch said Thursday. "The Farm Bill is controversial. It always is, but not acting at all is even worse. It's inexcusable."

Welch said House Speaker Rep. John Boehner, R-Ohio, and majority leader Eric Cantor, R-Va.,

are keeping the bill off the floor.

The House version includes big cuts to the food stamp program, which Welch said he hopes will not make it into the final bill, still he said the most dangerous option is simply putting the Farm Bill off until after the November election simply to avoid political battles.

"There is strong bi-partisan support to start debating this bill," Welch said. "Farming is a tough business and the last thing farmers need is uncertainty."

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt. and the most senior member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, fought to retain a provision in the Senate version of the bill that supports the organic certification cost sharing program.

The House version would slash that program.

"The urgency of finishing a new Farm Bill is compounded this year by the severe drought facing many farmers. House factions should not be allowed to punt the Farm Bill away until after the election," Leahy said. "Farms are businesses and farmers already have to cope with weather and market uncertainties as they plan ahead. The last thing they need is for congressional obstructionists to pile on more uncertainty about whether there will be a new Farm Bill."

Vermont dairy farmers could lose their support through the Milk Income Loss Contract, or MILC, if Congress fails to act before Sept. 30.

U.S. Department of Agriculture Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan said that while the Midwest drought is getting national attention, New England farmers will also feel the effects of an expired Farm Bill.

"We know dairy farmers are in a world of pain," Merrigan said. "We don't think this is over. There is still time for Congress to act on this."

Merrigan is from Western Massachusetts and worked for Sen. Patrick Leahy before being named as a Deputy Secretary in the Agriculture Department.

Farming never stops, Merrigan said, and while Congress delays passing a new Farm Bill, farmers are considering this season's crop and making plans for the winter and even towards spring planting.

Those decisions are that much harder to gauge when there is in decision on what kind of support they can expect to receive.

"There is no substitute for a proper Farm Bill," Merrigan said. "Feed prices are supposed to be high this year and many farmers in New England are already suffering from the effects of Irene. We know we need it."

One of the biggest sticking points among Democrats and Republicans is the fight over the food stamp program.

The Republican-led House wants to slash \$16 billion from food aid to the poor, while the Democrat-led Senate is recommending \$4 billion in food stamp reductions.

Marissa Parisi, executive director of Hunger Free Vermont, said cuts to the state's 3SquaresVt program would have an immediate impact on families that are already struggling to make ends meet and get food on the table.

The proposed Senate cuts would impact many Vermonters, and the House cuts, Parisi said, would force thousands of seniors and low income residents off the program.

Even if Congress passes emergency legislation to extend the food stamp money the battle

against the cuts will continue, and as the economy continues to limp along, Parisi said it will just make it that much harder for families living on the edge to get ahead.

"Now is not the time to do this," she said. "These cuts will affect the most vulnerable among us. This program does a good job of protecting people from falling below the poverty line. We're all frustrated about this."